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ABSTRACT

According to the most recent National Adult Literacy Survey, nearly half of Illinois adults lack sufficient reading proficiency to ensure job success and advancement in 21st century workplaces. The Test of Adult Basic Education is currently used as a pretest/posttest in Illinois' existing adult basic education, adult secondary education, and English-as-a-second-language programs. What is needed instead is an assessment articulating the job skills achieved by individual learners so that they can make better career choices and employers can select appropriate employees. Existing adult literacy programs and policies must increase their emphasis on workplace literacy. By formally linking adult literacy education with job skills needed in the workplace, the Workforce Investment Act marks a step forward in designing a work force development system. In addition to reading skills, the following complex skills are also needed in the workplace: knowing how to learn, listening and communicating orally, creative thinking and problem solving, self-esteem, interpersonal skills, and organizational effectiveness. Other strategies for meeting workplace literacy needs include the following: define reading competence in terms of a person's ability to apply specific reading skills; provide programs for those who have not met traditional definitions of literacy; and assess individuals' literacy together with other essential employment skills. (MN)

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Issue: *Illinois Adult Literacy Failing the Workforce: Alternative Solution Needed*

Nearly half of all Illinois adults do not have sufficient reading proficiency to assure job success and advancement in the workplaces of the 21st century.

This conclusion is based upon information in the recently released *National Adult Literacy Survey* (NALS) administered by the Educational Testing Service with funds provided by the U.S. Department of Education. The NALS is the most detailed analysis of literacy ever produced for the United States. It suggests that past studies of literacy, which have focused on the number of "illiterates" in the nation, have not addressed the complexity of the nation's literacy problem. Rather than defining literacy as a skill which individuals either do or do not have, the NALS treats literacy as a variable skill that specific individuals possess in widely different amounts.

When viewed in this way, the level of adult literacy in Illinois (and in the U.S.) is too low to meet employment needs now and will be even more inadequate in the future.

What are the NALS findings, especially those applicable to Illinois?

Illinois was one of twelve states that participated in the NALS study. Over one thousand randomly selected adults were tested to determine their range of ability on each of three different scales: prose, document, and quantitative literacy. They were then placed in one of five different ability groupings, with level 1 representing the lowest level of ability and level 5 the highest.

Illinois' literacy statistics follow the pattern of other Midwestern states. Specifically,

- On the whole, adults living in the Midwest and West scored higher than adults in other parts of the country.
- *Almost one-quarter of Illinois adults* (21 to 24 percent) demonstrated skills in the lowest level of prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies. Many adults at this level were unable to total entries on a deposit slip, locate the time or place of a meeting in a written notice, or identify specific information in a brief news article.

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- *Another one quarter of Illinois adults* (23 to 27 percent) performed at the second level of proficiency. While their skills were more varied than individuals at level 1, those skills were still very limited.

- *Nearly 50 percent of Illinois adults* (those who scored in levels 1 and 2) *were rarely able to respond effectively to problem-solving tasks which required reading ability.*

- Approximately 30 percent of the survey participants performed in level 3 on each literacy scale. Individuals at this level were able to integrate information from relatively dense text samples and on the quantitative assessment were able to determine appropriate arithmetic operations based on the information provided in writing.

- Twenty to 23 percent of the respondents scored in the two highest levels of prose, document, and quantitative literacy. These ability levels involved long and complex documents.

- The average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies of adults in Illinois were slightly lower (five or six points) than adults living in other states of the Midwest.

- Older adults were more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate limited literacy skills.

- Illinois residents who were born in the United States performed far better in the survey, on average, than foreign-born individuals. About 75 percent of the participating Illinois residents who scored at the lowest level on the quantitative literacy scale were foreign born.

What do these survey results mean?

Readers will interpret these results in different ways. Some will suggest that these results are an indictment of Illinois' elementary and secondary education system. Others will conclude that more and better efforts must be made in adult education, and especially in education targeted at persons born and raised in other cultures. Many NALS readers will interpret the survey to mean that the Illinois labor force is not well prepared for the computer-related jobs that will become more and more common in the decades just ahead.

And indeed, the NALS survey does indicate that literacy, as presently measured and defined, will no longer prepare workers adequately for the jobs that will be most common in the early decades of the 21st century. These will be jobs that require problem-solving skills and knowledge of technology – jobs that require higher levels of literacy than nearly half of the adults in Illinois currently possess.

Does other research support the NALS findings?

Other research does provide further evidence of the strong connection between literacy and economic performance. It suggests:

- For individuals, low literacy and inadequate basic skills translate into diminished employment prospects, depressed earnings, and increased dependence on public resources.

- For companies, employees' low literacy and inadequate basic skills represent a hidden cost, a drag on productivity and competitiveness. As companies upgrade technology and reorganize workplace practices to improve productivity, they must simultaneously identify and train workers who lack the skills to perform effectively under new conditions.

- For the United States, low literacy and inadequate skills impede national economic performance, reduce productivity, and increase social costs.

The NALS study simply reports that, despite these well known relationships between literacy and economic well-being, the level of adult literacy is woefully inadequate to meet modern workplace requirements. Further, although the nation's rapidly expanding economy has created millions of

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new jobs over the past thirty years, the pool of qualified entry level candidates for these jobs is small and getting smaller. Competition for qualified entry level workers has never been more demanding. Such economic realities are what make the NALS findings most alarming.

Why are current adult literacy programs not meeting these needs?

At the present time, adult literacy programs fall into three categories:

- *Adult Basic Education* (ABE) – programs designed to develop reading skills in the levels K-12.
- *Adult Secondary Education* (ASE) – programs designed to provide students with high school completion or its equivalent, the GED.
- *English as a Second Language* (ESL) – English instruction for those whose primary language is not English. While this is certainly an important part of literacy development, much of this program deals with language acquisition.

Upon entrance into these programs, adult learners are given the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) as a pre and post test. Test results indicate generic grade levels of literacy achievement rather than specific literacy abilities.

From the employer's point of view, this presents a problem. Unless a job applicant has a high school diploma or a GED, the employer has little information regarding the applicant's ability to function successfully in the workplace. Even a diploma or a GED merely indicates a level of literacy achievement, not a description of skills attained. And, as the NALS suggests, neither of these achievements assures the literacy skills needed by so many of the jobs in today's workplace.

What is needed is an assessment which articulates the job skills that a particular individual has achieved thus would allow the individual to make better career choices and prospective employers could make more appropriate employee selection.

Are current educational policies addressing this need?

Government has traditionally assigned responsibility for adult literacy to the nation's educational system. As the nation began to emerge as an industrial power in the late 19th century, the federal government took a more active role in supporting education for both children and adults, including literacy and citizenship education for new immigrants. By the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, federal support for adult education emerged. Such support was enhanced during the depression of the 1930's when adult education was linked to welfare programs as well.

True to its responsibility for adult education and literacy, the U.S. Department of Education (formerly the U.S. Office of Education) has recommended needed changes in policies and programs affecting adult literacy education. It recommended the Adult Education Act of 1966 which became the major federal program for basic education and literacy skills for adults. The act defined adults as persons 16 years of age or older who had less than a high school education and were no longer enrolled in school. While the act immediately led to an increase in the number of adult education and literacy programs, the number of such programs gradually declined after 1978.

Other Departmental recommendations, combined with Congress' concern that there was too little accountability for adult education programs, led to the National Literacy Act of 1991 which established the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). One of the NIFL's duties was to monitor the progress of the states and nation toward achievement of the National Literacy and Lifelong Learning Goal.

What is workplace literacy and how is it different?

The concept of "workplace literacy" is different from the definition of literacy used in academic curricula. The latter equates literacy with the level of reading skill needed to acquire a high school diploma or a GED certificate. The term "workplace literacy,"

instead, refers to a description of levels of literacy skills needed to hold particular jobs in the workplace.

Rather than focusing on a person's ability to read words, workplace literacy is defined as a person's ability to *apply* their reading skills in ways that are meaningful to employers. It is concerned, for example, with the level of a person's ability to locate information in a text, to follow written instructions, and to manage computations. Education for workplace literacy is designed to provide the reading skills needed for particular jobs and to meet other specific literacy criteria for the needs of a particular workplace. As importantly, literacy skills such as problem solving and decision making are also essential in individual roles of parent, citizen, and participant in community affairs.

Does the government support the concept of workplace literacy?

Responding to the urging of the U.S. Department of Labor, Congress passed the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998. This new law was contained within the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and for the first time, formally linked adult literacy education with job skills needed in the workplace.

Labor's role in the passage of the act was significant for it demonstrated that the location of government responsibility for adult literacy programs may be changing from education agencies to agencies concerned with developing job skills. In Illinois, for example, new legislation has been passed which transfers responsibility for adult literacy education from the Illinois State Board of Education to the state's Community College Board which has historically played a much more active role in preparing people for the job market.

What does the Workforce Investment Act provide?

The WIA gives workplace literacy skills a higher priority in adult education and, rather than providing adult learners with a generic level of literacy, it seeks to impart more complex literacy skills related to workplace needs.

Further, the WIA is designed to provide states and localities with greater flexibility in using federal adult education training monies.

> In many ways, WIA marks a step forward in the design of the workforce development system; it provides a structure through which longstanding issues of program quality and access may be addressed. Because WIA devolves authority over program design and grants flexibility in program delivery to state and local governments, the actual structure and operation of job training programming will vary from place to place, reflecting differing local needs and varying interpretations of the legislation. (Theodore Nikolas, *Workforce Investment Act: Recommendations for Implementation in Illinois*. Chicago: Great Cities Institute, July 1999, 1.)

Finally, the WIA expands the arena of literacy instruction to include both those who are unemployed and those who are employed but who wish to achieve higher levels of literacy, not only for immediate employment but for future career growth.

What besides reading makes up the "complex literacy" skills needed in the workplace?

The traditional idea of basic literacy is only one of seven skills viewed by organizations as being necessary for employment. The others, which together constitute criteria against which an individual's skills should be assessed and evaluated, include:

- Knowing how to learn;
- Listening and oral communication;
- Creative thinking and problem-solving;
- Self-esteem, goal setting/motivation, and personal/career development;
- Interpersonal skills, negotiation, and teamwork;
- Organizational effectiveness and leadership.

Assessments of workplace literacy skills that evaluate both applied reading skills and these seven skills enable both employers and prospective employees to make better decisions regarding employment and career potential. By defining literacy in such wholly operational terms, adult education programs will be better able to prepare the nation's workforce for the kinds of jobs that are and will be available.

What else needs to be done to improve literacy and the workforce?

Raising the level of adult literacy in the United States, and especially in Illinois where the state lags behind its immediate neighbors on this important workforce requirement, should be an immediate response to the NALS survey. At a minimum, and in addition to more appropriate adult education programs directed toward this end, a number of basic changes must be made in the traditional approach to adult literacy education:

1. Literacy should be viewed as a relative concept, embracing many different skill levels, rather than as a competency that a person either does or does not have.

2. Possession of a high school diploma or GED can no longer be accepted as adequate evidence of a person's ability to meet the skill requirements of today's workplaces.

3. While the TABE and GED equivalency assessments are probably adequate for family literacy purposes, a more specific and descriptive individual assessment is needed for the development of workplace literacy. Pre-program counseling is suggested as a means to more appropriate adult literacy instruction.

4. Workplace literacy requires that reading competence be defined in terms of a person's ability to apply specific reading skills rather than simply demonstrate some mastery of a predetermined level of competence.

5. Programs must be available so that those who have met traditional definitions of literacy, but who fall into the first two NALS levels in terms of competence, can upgrade their literacy skills and improve their employment opportunities.

6. Each individual's literacy must be assessed together with other essential employment skills into a profile that can be used to give that person better career counseling and to enable employers to make more adequate assessments of the skills of their applicants for available job openings.

All of these actions are necessary steps toward the achievement of what must be the ultimate goal of adult literacy policy, nationally and in Illinois: to raise the level of functional literacy in society so that individuals will have the ability to support themselves and their family in sustainable, meaningful work. As importantly, these more complex literacy skills allow one to be a contributing member of the community.

The aggregation of such individual skills will provide the state and national communities with the competencies required by jobs in the new electronic, high technology economy.

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